

## Discovery: Miranda July Renaissance Riot Grrrl Chris Chang

Film Comment, July/August 2000

Miranda July's *Nest of Tens* will be featured at the Walter Reade theater's New York Video Festival July 21--27, 2000.

Defining Miranda July is like trying to define a color. When confronted with the scope of her work – multimedia performance, experimental audio, single channel video, fanzines, riot grrrl film and video distribution, and now perhaps, following a cameo as a nurse with a bruised eye in *Jesus' Son*, acting — the head spins. And that's part of the plan. The 26-year-old Portland, Oregon-based artist is fascinated with systems, codes, and the fallacy of the normal perpetrated by things like education and IQ tests. (She also digs human relationships.) She's at her best when she shows the systems breaking down, mutating, or emptied of the content that gives them meaning. Consider the following real-life example. I approached her for an interview with the idea it wouldn't be, so to speak, normal. I wanted to turn it into a collaborative extension of her work. At first she agreed but then, appropriately, the process fell apart. She explained how good she was at providing what people wanted. But for my concept there was a problem. It wasn't personal enough. I received an e-mail with the following annulment: "It would be different if you and I were in love, but since we are not I have no real reason to read your mind and become the part that is missing. I don't mean this as an insult — in fact I consider it a high compliment that you would suggest we do what collaborators in art and love do. Whores also do this and that is their right." So much for my new art career.

July first came to regional attention while still in high school in Berkeley, when she produced a play based on a pen-pal relationship with an inmate in the California prison system. She moved to Portland and became enmeshed in the riot grrrl scene – a locus of DIY music and art. Out of this energized breeding ground arose the Big Miss Moviola project, an ingenious and self-perpetuating "video chain letter." Women filmmakers submit a short film that is then added to a compilation tape containing ten other participants. The tape is then returned to the contributor. By August of this year there will be upwards of 100 films in circulation. The idea for Moviola came from July's perception that the world is filled with inspirational movies that can't be seen. And she pushes it further — she's also inspired by films that haven't been made. July, not too surprisingly, claims all her writing comes from the subconscious.

The *Amateurist* (98) and *Nest of Tens* (00) are July's most intriguing videos. The titles are as slippery as the content. An amateurist, explains July, "is someone who makes amateurs." The video features two characters, both played by the director, in a split-personality relationship that triangulates exploitive experimentation, symbiosis, and co-dependent pathology. The first woman discusses what she observes on a television monitor. The screen displays a seemingly mute and perhaps mentally disturbed woman captured by a surveillance camera, who sends and receives signals that the Watcher interprets for the audience. Apparently she is good at what she does. She's been watching "nine to twelve hours a day for the last four and a half years." And although the coded communication has the semblance of meaning within the world of the video,

it remains opaque to an outsider. Touching the screen, tracing the outline of the Amateur's legs, the Watcher remarks, "Always the eleven, pretty basic." The Watcher is reading the Amateur's body, analyzing her movements for numbers. I asked July about the relation between numbers and biology. "The Watcher has systems for life and her body that allow her to function, just as you and I have systems: jobs, eating and sleeping schedules. These things feel arbitrary to me sometimes, as though they exist only to be maintained and self-enforced. I think I might be hyper-aware of this because I have barely ever had a job, and yet I am disciplined. I rigorously invent and enforce my own job/reality, but I'm constantly aware that these systems are all made up, certainly my own are, and therefore all the rest are. This includes systems that rely on numbers." Arbitrary systems hold the world together and when you remove reality-based content you can arrive at, for example, the eerie emotional formalism of *The Amateurist*. "I just took out the middle, left the person, the numbers, the importance of a system," says July. If you read that carefully you'll notice that the Watcher and the Amateur have merged.

"Are there ever two number ones? No, there's only one number one and that's us as a group," says Miranda July, playing the part of a corporate suit in *Nest of Tens*. This 27-minute video is her most ambitious to date. It weaves together four scenarios, which include the machinations of a sexually dysfunctional family, a developmentally disabled performance artist lecturing an audience on phobias, and a young boy's surreal experimentation on a naked infant. The latter provides one of the more startling sequences: the boy places the infant on her back on the living room table, and, using cotton balls, Q-Tips, liquid soap, and bubble gum, performs, for lack of better words, a cleansing ritual. Cut to a bedroom interior. The baby is now lying on a bed. The boy scribbles a series of ones and zeros on a piece of paper. It resembles binary code. He tears the paper in half and affixes the pieces to the arms of the chair he sits in. His fingers punch away at the numbers as if they were the controls of a video game. His face turns sinister as heavy metal guitar riffs flood the soundtrack. The infant twitches in distress. After watching that, and the other three sequences in which seemingly everyday people go about acting completely normal while demonstrating distinct abnormality, one gets the sense that these things go on all the time. Patterns of behavior are systems, July would call them arbitrary, but upon closer examination that same arbitrariness opens up worlds of possibility. That's where artistic freedom comes from.

The title *Nest of Tens* bothered me. I assumed it referred to the numerical scribbling of the boy, but binary code only appears in a sequence of zeros and ones, so technically the video should have been titled *Nest of Zeros and Ones*. Which is a lot less cryptic. "I suck at math and calendars," says July. "But I also assumed that the ones and zeros were the nest of tens. To be honest I didn't really think of the zeros and ones as binary code, although I did think of them as numbers that become actual sliders and buttons. A nest is a safe place you make for yourself out of things you find, even if some of those things are already in use by other sectors of society, like tens." Which brings up a crucial point. Miranda July is an artist not only obsessed with systems, numbers, and estranged behavior. At the core of her treatment of these issues is a belief in salvation through art. I think she expressed it to me best when I asked her about a song on one of the three CDs she's released in which a diseased Uma Thurman is cured by the realization that she is in a movie. "This song," says July, "has something to do with real and unreal people and real and unreal physical pain and how the movies - or art - could make someone so unreal they didn't have to suffer." Imagine that.